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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000266

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: CHALDEANS LEAVING IRAQ THROUGH ISTANBUL

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: A significant number of Chaldean-Iraqis have left Iraq, and are currently taking refuge in Istanbul. Estimates vary on the size of the group, with Turkey's de facto Chaldean leader estimating 4,600, while Catholic relief Charity Caritas thinks around 1,500 refugees may currently be in Istanbul. Adverse conditions in Iraq and pressure from other Iraqi ethnic groups appear to be the prime reason for the exodus. The tiny local Chaldean community is overwhelmed by the number of new refugees. END SUMMARY.

Chaldeans Seeking Refuge

2. (SBU) Poloff met January 21 with Fr. Francois Yakan, Vicar-General of the Chaldeans of Turkey. Due to the fact that the Chaldean Bishop of Turkey is very old and infirm, Yakan is the de facto leader of Turkey's tiny Chaldean community, constituting some 300 believers. Yakan believes that there are currently 4,600 Chaldeans who have fled Iraq and are living in Istanbul. Per Yakan, some are legally present in Turkey, others arrived legally but have overstayed their visa, and some illegally crossed into Turkey. Most of these refugees are going to Canada and Australia, and a small number to the United States. Yakan reports he was surprised to find that, in addition to Arabic and Chaldean, most of these refugees also speak English.

3. (SBU) Yakan said that Turkish Chaldeans find themselves in a considerable bind because of the migration. With such a tiny community, they have little to no means of assisting so many of their fellow believers. Yakan himself has borrowed money from relatives to assist the refugees, and says he spends most of his time in the Istanbul Police Foreign Citizen's Section. According to Yakan, Turkish police who arrest a Chaldean in Turkey illegally are willing to release the person to relatives or friends. If none can be found, the detainee is returned to Iraq. Yakan assists the refugees in filling out Turkish-language paperwork and finding relatives in Turkey.

4. (SBU) Yakan's estimate of 4,600 refugees in Turkey may be inflated. Francis Teoh at UNHCR-Ankara reports that they have had very few claims to refugee status from Iraq since the conflict began, and the number of those applying for refugee status is approximately the same as prior to the conflict. Teoh reports that the MFA has assured him that there are no forcible deportations to Iraq. Since refugees from Iraq can neither be resettled nor deported, their status after application with UNHCR is "frozen." However, UNHCR can provide applicants with letters indicating their refugee status, which may be helpful if the refugees are detained by Turkish police.

5. (SBU) Caritas, a Catholic relief organization, reports that there is a sizeable community of Christian-Iraqi refugees in Istanbul, mostly Chaldeans and some Suriyanis. Per Caritas estimate, 304 families have applied to them for assistance. Caritas estimates that the families are fairly large, averaging 5 people per family. Caritas reports that the refugees come from various regions of Iraq, including North, South, and Baghdad.

Need for Outside Assistance

6. (SBU) Yakan says that outside support is being solicited from many other groups, with no assistance to date. The Papal Nuncio in Istanbul has permitted the Chaldeans to use St. Antoine Church for services, due to the large number of worshippers. Yakan is soliciting support from Chaldean communities abroad, which include approximately 270,000 Chaldeans in the US and 80,000 in the EU. Yakan will be attending meetings with European and American Chaldeans in Paris and Brussels in the near future to discuss possible assistance.

17. (SBU) Ideally, Yakan would prefer that the Chaldeans not leave Iraq at all, as the community there (which he believes numbered 1 million before the most recent war) has shrunk to 700,000 people. Yakan believes discrimination by other minorities in Iraq, coupled with an unstable political situation, account for the migration. Per Yakan, Kurds and Shi'a in particular are making life uncomfortable for the Chaldeans, seeking to cement their own hold on various towns, and even jobs, by removing the Chaldeans already present. Yakan related one story of 3 Chaldean nurses in Kirkuk who were all fired from their jobs so that Kurds could be hired.

Fears of a Wave to Come  
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18. (SBU) In tandem with Iraq's larger infrastructural problems, Chaldeans have been hit even harder, Yakan reports. Chaldean schools and hospitals all are currently defunct, he says. Yakan fears that, as Shi'a and Kurds consolidate their hold, the Chaldeans will be more and more marginalized. Yakan fears that "since Turkomans, Armenians, and others have whole countries paying attention to their minorities' concerns, Chaldeans will be easily forgotten."  
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